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RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 1814  
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 0865  
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA PRIORITY 1489  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 001075

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/14/2018  
TAGS: PGOV KDEM PREL BG  
SUBJECT: CRUNCH TIME FOR NEGOTIATING THE RETURN TO DEMOCRACY  
REF: DHAKA 1069

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty. Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d)

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SUMMARY  
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¶11. (C) The two Caretaker Government Advisers leading negotiations with political parties on terms to ensure a smooth return to democracy explained to Ambassador Moriarty on 10/14 their end-game strategy. The key elements of their plan were to convince the two major parties to refrain from nominating for Parliament at least some of their most corrupt partisans; to hold local elections right after the Parliament vote to decentralize political power; and to promote a pre-election summit at which former Prime Ministers Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina would agree to accept the election results. Communications Adviser Major General (retired) Ghulam Quader and Education Adviser Hossain Zillur Rahman also discussed how to keep the military supportive of the political process. They expressed concern that legal efforts against Zia and Hasina were potential landmines to a smooth transition. Both men expressed optimism their efforts would succeed. If this moderate Muslim-majority nation of 150 million people is to avoid sinking into a political morass they had better be right.

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THE THREE-STEP PLAN  
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¶12. (SBU) The military-backed Caretaker Government running Bangladesh since January 2007 has been conducting formal dialogues with all major parties to discuss political concerns in the run-up to the Parliamentary elections December 18. Advisers Quader and Zillur met with the Ambassador October 14 just hours before their first formal negotiating session with the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). (Note: While the meeting with the BNP broke up with no announced agreement on measures to ensure a free and fair vote, the two sides planned to meet again. End note.) The Advisers were optimistic that the BNP would follow its arch-rivals, the Awami League, and register for the Parliamentary elections; earlier in the week the Election Commission extended the registration deadline by five days from October 15 to accommodate the party. BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia on October 13 indicated to the Ambassador her party would participate in the elections (reftel).

¶13. (C) The Advisers confirmed the effort by some to replace the Caretaker Government with a national unity government involving all major parties had ended. Instead, the Advisers enumerated three steps they considered the best bet for

ensuring a smooth transition back to democracy. First, the major parties should agree to so-called "negative lists" of partisans tainted by corruption who would not run for Parliament. Second, the Government should stick to its plan to hold upazilla (county-level) elections just days after the national election to prevent newly elected Members of Parliament from influencing the results. Finally, BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia and Awami League President Sheikh Hasina should put aside their rabid personal animosity and hold a pre-election summit to publicly agree to accept the election results. The two women also could agree on democratic reforms that would ensure a substantive role for the opposition party in governance. That would be a break from the country's traditional winner-take-all political mentality.

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NOT AN IMPOSSIBLE TASK  
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¶4. (C) Leading officials in both parties have expressed interest in reaching agreement to exclude from Parliament at least some senior members with unsavory reputations. Khaleda Zia has expressed support for a summit, while Sheikh Hasina has promised a decision upon returning to Bangladesh from the United States, where she is on medical parole. Zillur said the Advisers were urging representatives for the two ladies to prepare an agenda for a summit. Both parties, however, have expressed strong opposition to holding the upazilla elections under the Caretaker Government, preferring to delay

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the vote so that their new Members of Parliament can campaign for local allies. Neither the BNP nor Awami League, however, has indicated it would withdraw from the political process should the local elections be held in late December as now scheduled.

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KEEPING THE SOLDIERS ON SIDE  
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¶5. (C) Quader noted that some within the armed forces worried that the political parties would seek revenge against military leaders who supported the Caretaker Government, which during its tenure aggressively prosecuted Zia, Hasina and scores of other senior politicians on graft charges. He suggested the formation of a national security council could ease those concerns by ensuring the military retained some role in government. Zillur said its members might include the Army Chief, the President, and Zia and Hasina. Quader said Hasina had accepted the concept, but Zia believed any action on the issue should await the sitting of the new Parliament. The Ambassador suggested any new body not be called a "National Security Council" because such a name would raise concerns of a sustained political role for the armed forces.

¶6. (C) The Advisers also said the future of Chief of Army Staff Moeen Uddin Ahmed, a strong supporter of the Caretaker Government and its reforms, must be part of any grand political settlement. They said Moeen was not keen to become President, which was a non-starter anyway since any increase in power of the largely ceremonial position would require a Constitutional change approved by Parliament. Quader endorsed the idea of extending by a year Moeen's term as head of the army, which expires in June 2009. (Note: Moeen himself has been silent in public about his aspirations after the end of the Caretaker Government. End note.)

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POTENTIAL SPOILERS  
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¶7. (C) In assessing what could go wrong with their end-game, the Advisers noted recent court rulings that might create

political trouble. For example, Sheikh Hasina's attempts to get bail in her graft cases, which the Awami League said was a precondition for its participation in elections, have been rejected. (Note: Khaleda Zia was released from jail on bail in September. End note.) Zillur attributed the failure in Hasina's case to incompetent defense lawyers and said he believed the issue ultimately would be resolved. The courts also have yet to endorse the Caretaker Government's proposal to redraw Parliamentary districts. Quader said if the plan remained in legal limbo the Government would revert to the old boundaries. Finally, Zillur expressed frustration that the Anti-Corruption Commission continued to file graft cases against Khaleda Zia and other prominent politicians at a highly sensitive political time. While not questioning the merits of the cases themselves, he believed the run-up to the election was not the time to file cases that could markedly increase the risk of parties bycotdhne`he Perim\nN{r-0  
yfhe%UG{Q+9Z?QNXQQ/horse-trading between the Caretaker Government and the major parties that will determine the prospects for a smooth return to democracy. At stake is not only whether Parliamentary elections will be free and fair, but whether they will lead to lasting reforms that can help Bangladesh move beyond its past dysfunctional democracy of endemic graft and violence. Quader and Zillur clearly are steadyng, calming influences in an otherwise over-heated environment in which most players are primarily interested in advancing their personal political prospects. (Note: The two Advisers claim no political ambition beyond the Caretaker Government. Quader told the Ambassador he could hardly wait for transition to conclude so he could go to Brooklyn and spend time with his family in Prospect Park. End note.) The Embassy will continue to support their efforts to convince politicians to focus not only on their parties' well-being but that of their country as well.

Moriarty